

Zoology (LSUMZ), kindly placed at my disposal the previously unpublished data of a series of six Peruvian specimens collected during expeditions by LSUMZ in dpto. Amazonas in 1978–1981, all of the widespread form *tricolor*. Two of these were collected along the río Cenepa (near Huampami, 04°28'S, 78°10'W, 200 m), and four along the río Santiago (Caterpiza, 03°50'S, 77°40'W, 200 m), suggesting that the species might also occur in the ornithologically unexplored Ecuadorian territory along these rivers. Field work in seemingly suitable habitat along the río Pastaza (Kapawi, Isla Sharamentsa) in Ecuador, by myself and others, has failed to demonstrate the presence of this easily detectable species, suggesting that its Ecuadorian distribution is genuinely limited to the rivers further west.

Although the Ecuadorian specimen has not been subspecifically allocated through direct comparison, it is undoubtedly referable to *tricolor* like the Peruvian specimens taken nearby.

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## A Syrian record: the case of Aharoni's Thick-billed Larks *Ramphocoris clotbey*

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Thick-billed Lark *Ramphocoris clotbey* is the sole representative of an attractive genus restricted to the Western Palearctic, where it breeds discontinuously, sparsely and, in some areas, erratically, from Morocco across North Africa to Jordan, north-central Saudi Arabia and, more irregularly, Kuwait (Snow & Perrins 1998). It was also mentioned for the 'Syrian desert' by Vaurie (1959) where, as detailed by Kumerloeve (1969a), two pairs were found in 1930 and, in 1931, a pair with four eggs. This information was repeated by Cramp (1988), but subsequently Baumgart (1995) considered that the records could not certainly be stated to have been made in modern-day Syria, and regarded the species' occurrence in the latter country as unproven. Snow & Perrins (1998) added similar clarification; it might also be remarked that as early as 1970 Hüe & Etchécopar had questioned whether these records might definitely be considered as being from the Syrian Arab Republic.

Given the species' somewhat nomadic tendencies, it is perhaps surprising that Thick-billed Lark has apparently wandered so infrequently beyond its main range: there are several records from the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia (Bundy *et al.* 1989), a single mention for the former South Yemen (Hollom *et al.* 1988), at an unknown location on 11 March 1962 (Warr unpubl. ms.), which was not included by Martins *et al.* (1996), an accepted record, in April 1999, in Oman (Eriksen &

Sargeant 2000) and a published claim of one in flight in the vicinity of the former Amik Gölü, southern Turkey, in late May 1975 (Anon. 1976), a record which was not admitted to the list of birds reliably recorded in the country (Kirwan *et al.* 1999).

### Aharoni and the Syrian Thick-billed Larks

What of the Syrian record? Kumerloeve (1969a) based his text on Aharoni (1931), who provided a detailed account of the discovery of the nest. However, neither proffered locality information. Prof. Aharoni was a Jewish zoologist of Lithuanian origin, who settled in Palestine and travelled extensively in the latter country and neighbouring regions until his death in 1946 (Warr 1996). His published contributions included the most thorough account of the African Darter *Anhinga rufa* colony at Amik Gölü (the former Sea of Antioch), now sadly lost, considerable information concerning Bald Ibis *Geronticus eremita* breeding places in Syria and many of our initial data for the breeding birds of the Syrian Desert (Aharoni 1928, 1929, 1930, 1931). Unfortunately, his reports were not always reliable or precise. As noted by Kumerloeve (1969b) and Baumgart (1995), there can be almost no doubt that Aharoni's (1932) claim that the Cyprus Wheatear *Oenanthe cypriaca* had bred in Syria is false, whilst Safriel (1980) ably elucidated the problems associated with divining the whereabouts of Aharoni's localities of Bald Ibis colonies in the same country, and Serra (2003) even suggested that over-reliance on these data had resulted in the latter species being erroneously considered to be extinct there.

Baumgart (1995) did not present details as to why he considered the records as uncertainly appertaining to modern-day Syria, nor did he speculate as to which country the records might refer. With the post-World War One division of the Ottoman Empire and our knowledge of Aharoni's wanderings, his records of Thick-billed Lark could pertain to Lebanon, Syria or Turkey.

### National boundary changes

Under the terms of the May 1916 Sykes–Picot agreement, Britain and France established an advance agreement to divide the Levant between them upon the cessation of hostilities, with Britain assuming control of modern-day Iraq, Israel and Jordan, and Lebanon and Syria (collectively Greater Syria) being administered by the French. Problems soon arose, however, particularly in the French mandate, which also included the province of Alexandretta (the modern-day Hatay or Antakya province of southernmost Turkey). A special administrative system was designed for the latter under the Franco–Turkish agreement of Ankara, in 1921, and expanded boundaries for Lebanon were declared in September 1920. Indeed, even under the Ottomans, the region around Mount Lebanon had enjoyed a state of semi-autonomy since 1861. In 1926, as part of ongoing constitutional and governmental changes to Greater Syria, the French instituted Lebanon as an independent republic, although it remained under their control. During the period between 1920 and

official independence the country's northern border was further north than its current position, encompassing the coastal strip as far as Latakia. In 1939, Alexandretta was finally ceded to Turkey, but despite strong Arab opposition to the French mandate, an independent Syria was not recognised until 1941 and this was not made official until 1946, whilst Lebanon only achieved such status three years earlier, in 1943 (Gilbert 1995, O'Brien 2002, Goldschmidt 2002, Keay 2003).

### The specimens

Aharoni (1931a,b) mentioned that his specimens had been sent to England, to Jourdain and Rothschild, and indeed, by chance, I located the two (one labelled a female and the other almost certainly a male, on the basis of size, much whiter-looking bill and more clearly demarcated cheek-spots, and the intensity and size of the black markings on the breast; see Keith *et al.* 1992, Svensson *et al.* 1999) in the Natural History Museum, Tring (accession numbers 1939.12.9.276 and 277; Fig. 1), and the label information confirms that they were taken at 'El Zerka, in the north Syrian desert, on 6 April 1931'. Furthermore, the egg collection at the same institution contains two eggs collected by Aharoni at a locality named Dschukeil,



Figure 1. Syrian specimens of Thick-billed Lark *Ramphocoris clotbey* held in the Natural History Museum, Tring (Guy M. Kirwan, copyright the Natural History Museum)

on 20 April 1931. Whether Aharoni found two nests is unclear, given the discrepancy in date and location and the information presented by Kumerloeve (1969a). The two-clutch hypothesis might appear more plausible, given the difference in dates and localities, and that Kumerloeve explicitly stated that 'the' nest had four eggs. However, a perusal of the specimen registers at Tring reveals that Aharoni was collecting at Baalbek and other sites in the Anti-Lebanon range on 20 April and the days immediately prior to and after this date, thus suggesting that an error was made in the registration or subsequently (see Knox & Walters 1992). Baumgart was apparently unaware of the existence of the specimens and eggs (M. Kasperek *in litt.* June 2003).

### Identifying the localities

We now come to the issue of identifying the whereabouts of these localities. It is as well to bear in mind the various problems inherent to such research, which were discussed by Safriel (1980). However, from my readings of Aharoni's published field work, it is equally important to note that he was not an uncritical or careless observer, despite some of the errors and problems outlined previously. In his writings, he consistently differentiated between Lebanon and Syria, rather than writing as if he were referring simply to Greater Syria. Thus, from the specimens register at Tring it is usually possible to identify in which of the modern-day countries Aharoni was collecting during a given period.

Given Aharoni's field work in the Hatay, it is possible that the records could have been made on Turkish soil. Neither El Zerka nor Dschukeil, even allowing for variant phonetics, is a Turkish name and both are absent from the most comprehensive gazetteer I have located (Burgett *et al.* 1984). Furthermore, I am unaware of any suitable habitat for the species in this region of Turkey (another factor mitigating against the claim mentioned earlier in this note).

At the time Aharoni made his observations, Lebanon comprised a slightly greater area than it does now. Irrespective of the obvious conclusion should Aharoni's *R. clotbey* have emanated from the part 'returned' to Syria (Latakia), this possibility seems rather unlikely, given the habitat in the relevant region. As already mentioned, the possibility that Aharoni failed to distinguish between Lebanon and Syria appears somewhat remote. For localities of either name (or tangible variants), I searched the Syrian gazetteer available within an online database ([http://www.nima.mil/gns/html/cntry\\_files.html](http://www.nima.mil/gns/html/cntry_files.html)). I located just two possibilities, both relating to El Zerka: Al Zirbeh (a town just south of Aleppo, now Halab, and relatively close to the Turkish border) and Al Zarqa (just north of Al Raqqa and much further east). Of these, the former would appear more probable, it being much closer to Aharoni's known haunts and is in a region with suitable habitat for *R. clotbey*.

However, my perusal of the Tring specimens register revealed that he also collected a juvenile Houbara Bustard *Chlamydotis undulata* (NHM 1939.12.9.242)

and a Red-rumped Wheatear *Oenanthe moesta* (NHM 1939.12.9.219), among other species, at El Zerka. The latter is unknown in Lebanon, and the former has been recorded just twice (Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi 1999). Even more importantly, the register also reveals that Aharoni was collecting in the well-known Qaryatein area one day prior to a March 1931 visit to El Zerka. This would definitely seem to place the Thick-billed Lark records within modern Syrian territory and prove that Roselaar (1995) was correct to consider the records to have probably come from the Qaryatein–Palmyra area, but also means that neither of the localities identified during the gazetteer search is likely to represent the collecting site of Aharoni’s specimens.

Nonetheless, I enquired of Dr G. Ramadan-Jaradi (a Lebanese ornithologist) whether he knew of any localities similar to the names on Aharoni’s specimen labels. We eliminated two possibilities due to their location, but another merits full quotation of GR-J’s response of June 2003:

“We also have...Ain El Zarka (34°21’N 36°22’E)...one of the springs which feeds Al Assi (Oronte) River. It is located on the western slopes of the Anti-Lebanon range, north of the Beqaa Valley, near Hermel. It is a semi-desert habitat where rainfall—partially inhibited by the high mountains—is just 250 mm pa. It is a direct extension of the Syrian Desert via the Homs depression. Among the typical plants are *Artemisia*, *Haloxylon*, *Salsola*, *Achillea*, *Scorzonera* and *Gymnarrhenea*.”

It is worth noting that the Thick-billed Lark is not mentioned for Lebanon (Ramadan-Jaradi & Ramadan-Jaradi 1999), but that semi-desert areas around Hermel have produced a number of ‘surprises’ in recent years including Mourning Wheatear *Oenanthe lugens*, Scrub Warbler *Scotocerca inquieta* (Bara 2002) and Temminck’s Horned *Eremophila bilopha* and Bar-tailed Desert Larks *Ammomanes cinctura* (Bradshaw & Kirwan 2000), some or all of which may be breeding there. On the basis of the above, *R. clotbey* is clearly worth searching for too. Whilst I consider that the available evidence suggests that Aharoni really did collect his specimens in modern-day Syria, the possibility that it might also occur in present-day Lebanon needs also to be considered.

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